

Open Table: A community of compassion and service

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Volunteers fill bags with fresh food selected by Open Table clients. (Photo by Carolina Mellado)

by Carolina Mellado

In a world where food insecurity continues to affect countless families, Open Table is more than just a food pantry—it's a lifeline. Based in Maynard, Massachusetts, this dynamic nonprofit has been fighting hunger since 1989, transforming from a small community meal program into a vital force for food assistance in central Middlesex County. People come from all over the county to help out; a number of them from Carlisle, who take time out of their day every week or month to volunteer. Every week, Open Table provides fresh, culturally inclusive groceries and prepared meals to hundreds of individuals, from children to seniors, ensuring that no one in their service area goes hungry. But it's more than just food—it's about dignity, choice, and community. With a dedicated team of passionate staff and volunteers, Open Table is redefining what it means to combat hunger by offering not just nourishment but also hope and support to those who need it most. What sets Open Table apart is its unique approach—offering fresh, nutritious meals tailored to individual preferences while allowing guests the flexibility to choose what best suits their needs. Thanks to their hard work and dedication, the people of Open Table go on to serve about 1,500 prepared meals a week. That is quite an impressive goal to achieve in order to help feed those in need within the community.

Unlike many food pantries that distribute pre-packed bags, Open Table provides a number of possible fresh choices. "Our goal is for people to want to eat the food," says Alexandra DePalo, the director of this organization. "We don't just hand out a standard bag. We ask our clients about their protein preferences, dietary restrictions, and if they'd like extra produce."

This customization is possible thanks to donations from local farms, grocery stores, and in-kind food providers. To ensure a consistent variety of fresh and healthy options, Open Table also purchases food. The nonprofit collaborates as well with the Greater Boston Food Bank, though fluctuations in federal food programs, such as SNAP and WIC, pose challenges in the future. Staff assured me that when the time comes they will do all they can to continue meeting the needs of those who rely on their services.

When it comes to working together to help meet the needs of the community, Open Table's impact wouldn't be possible without its dedicated volunteers. More than 200 volunteers contribute each week, while the total annual number reaches approximately 574. Some assist in packing and distributing food, while others take on behind-the-scenes roles, such as managing inventory and organizing storage. "We couldn't function without our volunteers," DePalo emphasized. "We have volunteers dedicate themselves to specific tasks, while others jump in wherever they're needed. It's truly inspiring."

I had the opportunity to talk to a few volunteers from Carlisle, and asked them to share their experiences. In 2020, a local volunteer Sue Kirk and her husband, Steve, a member of the Rotary Club of Concord and Carlisle, began working with Open Table. Having already been involved in meal preparation for Bristol Lodge Soup Kitchen in Waltham, they joined Open Table, thinking it to be a natural next step. Since then Sue helps once or twice a month, cooking, preparing, and packaging meals for distribution. Over time, she has witnessed the kitchen grow, with more volunteers signing up and a more structured system put in place to increase meal production. When she first started, the pantry produced around 100 meals per shift, but that number has grown significantly, producing up to 1,500 weekly. The organization has streamlined its operations to ensure volunteers stay busy and productive throughout their shifts. Beyond meals, Open Table has expanded its outreach by delivering to local Councils on Aging and other programs that help provide meals to those in need. They have also started collecting personal care items, which are always in high demand but often overlooked. For Sue Kirk, working with Open Table has been incredibly rewarding. She says that thanks to this opportunity she has met many great people and finds it inspiring to be part of an organization that continuously evolves to meet the growing needs of the community.

After semi-retiring in 2018, Susan Stengrevics, a volunteer for Open Table, briefly returned to full-time work during the pandemic before officially retiring again. She then sought a meaningful way to stay active and engaged in her community. A conversation with Sue Kirk, a fellow town resident and member of the Concord Rotary, introduced her to Open Table. Initially joining as a kitchen volunteer, she became part of the team preparing and packaging meals for distribution. Over the years, she has witnessed the growing demand for food assistance, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw meal production increase from 400 to 1,500 meals per week! Under the leadership of executive chef Jed Hackney, Open Table has streamlined its operations to enhance efficiency, allowing for the preparation of a variety of meals tailored to different dietary needs. In addition to her kitchen duties, Susan has also taken on a role in organizing fundraising events, such as the annual "Chopped for Charity" auction, which provides critical financial support to the organization. Although her work is primarily behind the scenes, she finds great fulfillment in knowing that each meal prepared contributes to alleviating food insecurity in the community.

Volunteers Susan Mills and Stephanie Smith shared with me their passion and admiration for the work done at Open Table. Currently, they serve on the committee helping to organize this year's "Chopped for Charity" gala event. "Chopped for Charity" combines culinary competition with community engagement. The committee recruits three notable local chefs to participate in a cooking contest, one of the highlights each year. On stage, the chefs are given ingredients commonly found at Open Table and tasked with preparing a gourmet meal in just 30 minutes. The chefs do not know what ingredients they will be given to use until the start of the competition. When time is up, each entry is judged by a panel of culinary experts. "It's a fun and festive night," DePalo said. "Former competing chefs often return to donate private dinners and restaurant experiences, making it an incredible event for both food lovers and philanthropists." "Chopped for Charity" will take place on May 30th at the Nashawtuc Country Club and is expected to draw 250 attendees. All proceeds from the event directly support Open Table's programs.

Beyond pantry services, Open Table offers home deliveries to individuals with mobility challenges, ensuring that everyone, regardless of circumstance, has access to fresh meals. Deliveries are made to community centers, schools, and senior centers, expanding the organization's reach.

With food insecurity on the rise, Open Table remains committed to serving the community. The recent expansion of its warehouse has provided additional storage and workspace for volunteers, improving efficiency and increasing capacity. As the need for food assistance grows, this organization adapts, providing essential support to families and individuals who rely on their services. As word of Open Table's work spreads, more people step forward to volunteer, donate, and advocate for food security. "We're not out there advertising ourselves," DePalo noted. "People find us through word of mouth, and that speaks volumes about the need and trust in our services."

Open Table is more than just a food pantry; it is a community-driven effort built on compassion and solidarity. Whether through volunteering, donating, or attending "Chopped for Charity," there are many ways to support this vital mission and help ensure that no one in the community goes hungry.

Find more information at <http://www.opentable.org>, located at 33 Main Street, Maynard, MA. Δ

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